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INQUIRY ON LEAKS FOCUSES ON WOMAN

State Dept. Veteran Is Suspect in Search for Who Told of 'Disinformation' Plan

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 24 — The State Department acknowledged today that a 12-year veteran of the department was a suspect in the Reagan Administration's criminal investigation of unauthorized disclosures about a Government "disinformation" program.

Administration officials identified the suspect as Elaine Morton, who until this week was a director of the National Security Council's office of Near East and South Asian Affairs.

Law enforcement and other officials said she was transferred back to the State Department at her request after refusing to take a polygraph, or lie detector, examination sought by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The F.B.I. is trying to the source of an article earlier this month in The Washington Post about a deception plan designed to convince the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, that he faced extensive threats from the United States and domestic enemies.

Ms. Morton did not return repeated phone calls today to the State Department, where, the department said, she now works as an international relations officer in the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs.

Not Charged With Any Crime

Several Administration officials were hesitant to identify her as a suspect in the F.B.I. inquiry, noting she had not been charged with any crime.

A Justice Department official knowledgeable about the case said the agency would be hesitant to prosecute anyone targeted in the F.B.I. investiga-

tion. Because of the difficulty of gathering evidence and witnesses, so-called leak investigations have almost never resulted in prosecution.

The White House spokesman, Larry Speakes, said today that during the F.B.I. investigation, "one staff officer, a detailee from another agency, refused to cooperate fully in the investigation."

"In refusing to cooperate," he said, "the staff officer requested to return to the parent agency."

He added that the refusal to cooperate with the investigation "resulted in

a loss of trust and confidence essential for any individual holding a sensitive security position" and that "no culpability is imputed to the member's decision to leave the staff."

The Oct. 2 article in The Washington Post reported that the Reagan Administration had devised a policy that included leaking false information to the press about Colonel Qaddafi.

The article quoted a memorandum written by Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, the White House national security adviser, which described the campaign as combining "real and illusionary

events — through a disinformation program — with the basic goal of making Qaddafi think that there is a high degree of internal opposition to him within Libya."

At a news conference today, the State Department's chief spokesman, Charles E. Redman, said the suspect in the F.B.I. investigation was a civil servant who had worked for the State Department since 1974. He would not name the employee.

The department later confirmed that Ms. Morton was hired in 1974.

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